



# A Hospital Wing and a Prayer

*Lackland medical team cares for some of the Air Force family's tiniest members*

story and photos by Master Sgt. Ken Wright

**A**s Doctor (Maj.) Steve Messier pushes through what was shaping up to be an 80-hour work week, his face looks understandably tired. But despite the long hours, the neonatology fellow at Wilford Hall Medical Center's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit never fails to forget the needs of the premature babies surrounding him.

*Doctors biopsy four-day-old Logan Taylor's colon to determine what caused his digestive problems. Despite the invasive procedure, little Logan rested contently.*





**Senior Airman Brandon Sanford, a K-9 handler at Malmstrom Air Force Base, Mont.,** (above left) and his daughter, Annissa, take a little time for physical bonding called “Kangaroo Care,” in which mothers and fathers cuddle their children in a skin-to-skin embrace. **During a medical evacuation flight from Del Rio, Texas,** 1st Lt. Tanya Swann (above) tends to Logan. The helping hand doctors and nurses give in these emergencies saves the lives of countless infants. **Army Dr. (Capt.) Preston Omer reaches into an isolette** (left), a Plexiglass crib, to draw blood from one of his tiny patients. Locating a “preemie’s” narrow little veins is enough to make the sweat bead on anyone’s forehead.

“You always have to keep in the back of your mind that even when things are going OK for them, something could go really wrong at any minute,” said Dr. Messier.

When things do go wrong, the unit’s talented hands, warm hearts and state-of-the-art equipment take fast action.

The normal gestation period for infants is 40 weeks, with births prior to 37 weeks considered premature. The survival rate for babies born between 27 and 30 weeks is 95 percent, but those rates drop with every decreased week of gestation. The NICU has helped children born as early as 23 weeks survive, but despite superb care that keeps preemie survival rates at WHMC on par with leading U.S. hospitals, sometimes a baby’s organs simply have not matured enough to function as would a healthy, full-term baby.

The NICU is a special place where the best technology has to offer unites with the best human beings have to offer — kindness, compassion and character.

### Equipment and emotions

One of the more remarkable technological capabilities the NICU offers is the Department of Defense’s only Extra-Corporeal Membrane Oxygenation machine, which provides life-saving heart-lung bypass. When combined with the airlift abilities of the Air Force, the NICU is uniquely qualified to save babies virtually anywhere in the world. In fact, that help goes well beyond the military family, extending to foreign families in remote locations. With the help of aircrews, they have saved the lives of children from as far off as Okinawa, Japan.

To date, more than 150 patients have been ECMO treated by the unit,

62 of them needing ECMO transport. Predicted survival rates of children without ECMO transport are at less than 20 percent, but when Airmen from this unit step in, those rates rocket to greater than 70 percent.

Technology is only part of what nurtures these babies to good health. As 1st Lt. Carla Sutton prepares to clean Gavin White’s tracheotomy tube, she caresses the soft wisps of hair on his head. His round rosy face reflects nothing but bliss as her gentle touch comforts him. Sometimes it seems as if the best medicine is a loving touch.

Gavin was born at only 28 weeks and suffers from a narrow airway, which will likely require the breathing tube and a ventilator for at least his first year. At two months old, he weighs well more than 4 pounds, a weight that looks almost hefty in a room of cribs with babies that sometimes weigh less than a can of Coke.

Gavin’s parents, Tech. Sgts. Marsha and Jeremiah White, glow with pride over their little boy as they watch him get bigger and healthier. The task of caring for children with such serious medical problems is one that requires eternal vigilance, and the Whites are grateful to have such a great staff watching over their baby.

### Peace of mind

At a time when hundreds of thousands of military members are focusing on defeating enemies at home and abroad, the NICU goes to great lengths to ensure military families have piece of mind when their children or wives are at great risk of dying during or following birth.

That task — providing night and day care for an average of 17 “preemies” — is one that requires a gifted staff of more than 60 dedicated doctors, nurses and respiratory therapists, as well as many oth-





ers. The staff enlists the help of parents as much as possible, allowing them to take their child’s temperature, change diapers or clean their mouths that often have tubes leading to their bellies and lungs. Parents yearning to touch their babies relish the responsibilities.

Victoria Sanford, 20, whose husband Brandon is a K-9 handler at Malmstrom Air Force Base, Mont., visits their baby girl Annissa at least three times a day. Annissa was born 11 weeks early and weighed only one pound, three ounces. Her weight has more than doubled after 51 days of loving care in the NICU.

The constant worry and stress over their baby’s health takes a toll on parents as they ride an emotional roller coaster. Experiencing feelings of helplessness when they learn of their child’s illnesses, parents find comfort knowing when such crises occur, this is the place to be.

“I will never stop worrying about her,” said Mrs. Sanford, “but I am so glad she’s here.”

**Priceless Rewards**

Though the staff normally wears blue scrubs, you’re reminded most of them are Airmen and Soldiers when you see the camouflaged battle dress uniforms clash with the peaceful setting where life is preserved and nurtured. As Nurse Michelle Barragan inserts a needle into the foot of a baby boy, he sobs and waives his tiny hands in the air.

“I’m sorry sweetie,” said the 34-year nurse, struggling to find a tiny vein. “It’s not without emotion, but you know the baby is going to get better because of it. We just give them a cuddle and blow them a kiss.”

**Senior Airman Brandon Sanford and his wife, Victoria** (above), sit at the bedside of their little girl, Annissa, who was born at just 29 weeks gestation weighing only 1 pound, 3 ounces. Mrs. Sanford says that having Annissa at the NICU has “taken all her fears away,” but the young mother and father are desperate to take their little girl home. **Senior Airman James Taylor and his wife, Jamie** (right), dote over their baby boy, Logan. Airman Taylor, a firefighter at Laughlin AFB, Texas, and his wife, experienced the truest meaning of fear when Logan showed problems from possible intestinal blockage. The couple’s fears quickly subsided once he was under the loving care of the NICU.

Nurse Barragan has been in the NICU for 21 years, and her sensitivity to the needs of her patients and their families is not uncommon. Capt. Karen Larry has been a NICU nurse for 13 years and has witnessed a mountain of miracles and a river of tears. A tall stack of letters, photos and cards from parents sits on the corner of her desk.

“Making a difference in someone’s life, whether it is helping with the process of grief or healing, is the most rewarding part of my job here,” said Nurse Larry.

The difference she and her colleagues have made is apparent as you walk along the corridor leading to the NICU. A virtual mural of plaques thanking the staff covers a long stretch of wall. At first it looks like a tremendous “I love me” wall, but a greater story unfolds upon closer inspection — about those who’ve survived, and those who’ve died.

Capt. Larry’s eyes well up as she reads from one of her cards and reflects on the difference the NICU has made.

“This is what I’m supposed to do with my life. I love this place.” 🦅

